. . . But the Father was 'Hell Fire'

VIEWED ACCUSERS

Another True Adventure Tale

By CECIL CLARK

suicide by jumping overboard and although a line had been thrown to him he'd made no move to grab it.

The Pedersen brothers stood near their father, warily eyeing each man as he came forward, the younger Pedersen covertly sliding his left hand over the brass links that covered the knuckles of his right hand! To help the less condident make up their minds, Pedersen's loaded revolver lay on the table. They all signed.

At Cape Town, while lying at anchor, Pedersen went ashore to return with a justice of the peace. Each man had to take oath before the JP as to the correctness of his statement and his signature.

Armed with the protective statements one can imagine that skipper Pedersen felt at ease as he viewed the sky line of New York that fall, when the Puako was towed up the East River. The sworn signatures would checkmate any gabby members of the crew. He was wrong, for the motley group of seafarers, in wrinkled cheap clothing, lugging their sea bags, straggled up to New York's Federal Building to tell their story to anybody who would listen. Apparently someone did, for on June 4, 1919, Adolph Pedersen and his 18-year-old son, Adolph, Jr., stood in a New York courtroom charged with Hansen's murder.

APPARENTLY THE U.S. formula for dealing with murder on the high seas had been copied 100 years before from an early day English statute, which prescribed that the prisoners should be arraigned in court in a cage! It smacked a little of the days of Capt. Kidd but anyway a cage was built, and the two prisoners ensconced in it. Their defence counsel, Dudley Field Malone, objected; he said the prisoners couldn't see the witnesses properly nor hear what they said. The cage was abandoned.

If the cage idea was dropped, the charge was still in archaic form. It set out that the prisoners "did, with force and arms, not having the fear of God before their eyes, kill, Hansen, a human being." The penalty was either hanging or life imprisonment.

To prove its case the U.S. government called the crewmen to tell the story of the Puako's horror-filled voyage. Reilly, the Irishman, waxed emotional as he gave his evidence and swore that he saw Hansen clinging to the log line. He almost broke down when he said, "I heard him yell, I tell you. I heard him yell three times."

Faced with his signed statement sworn to before a South African JP, he swore it was obtained under duress. It was Reilly, by the way, who yelled the warning to Hansen, just before the mate felled the big Dane with his brass-bound punch.

The defence, on the other hand, made much of the fact that Hansen was a malcontent, and the crew unruly. Hansen, claimed the Pedersens, was a melancholy man" who contemplated suicide. They swore also that the cook committed suicide by jumping overboard. Adolph, Jr., held to the story that he threw the cook a line, but the unfortunate man made no effort to grab it. The crewmen swore no line was thrown.

Said Pedersen, Jr., a clue to the cook's mental condition was the fact he put ground glass in the hot cakes. Questioned about turning the hose repeatedly on the crew, he said he did it because they were dirty. "Jorgensen wore 13 shirts, one on top of the other," he said, "in 80 degree weather."

Young Pedersen, taxed with the appearance of Hansen's face after his confinement, answered: "He must have been in a fight with one of the crew."

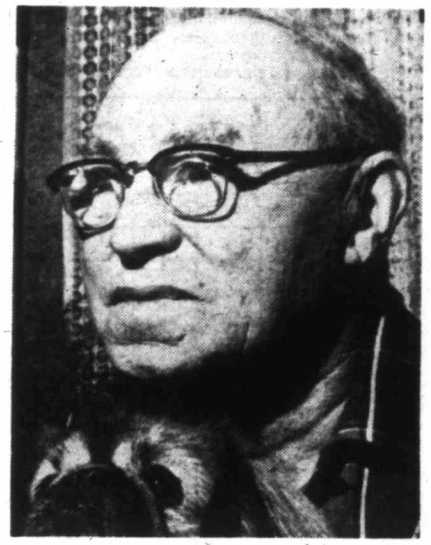
"How could he be in a fight if he was locked in the lazarette for a week" asked the prosecutor.

To this there was no answer.

"Hansen was afraid of the Black Hand Society," said Adolph's older brother on the stand, and thought a gang of them were waiting for him in Cape Town. I think he planned to destroy the ship and the crew; then the Black Hand would give up looking for him, thinking he'd done down with the vessel."

"And how did he propose saving himself?" enquired the prosecutor.

Again there was no answer.



JOHN RUSSELL ROBINSON with small friend . . . he well remembers.

ABOUT THE FOURTH DAY of the trial the argument centred on whether Hansen could have been saved, and the skipper and his two sons were positive that the sea was too rough to effect rescue. To settle the question of nautical skill, a big scale model of the Puako was brought into court, the sails set at the angle to correspond with the direction of the wind on the day in question. Charley Brown, master of the Puako's sister ship, Cohala, swore that any attempt to haul ship, if wind and weather were as described, would have been disastrous.

Following him were a curious succession of witnesses to speak for and against this question of ship handling, even old salts from a nearby sailors' Snug Harbor. One of them, old Capt. Charles Agar, by extraodinary coincidence, had many years before performed the exercise of unexpectedly bringing the ship into the wind to pick up a man hanging to the log line.

That man was none other than . . . Hell Fire Pedersen!

Old square-rigger skipper Capt. Duffy (then skipper of the U.S. transport Luckenbach), said the rescue was feasible, and aged Capt. John Cameron said Pedersen should have dropped the gallant yard to eliminate risk in turning the vessel.

Pedersen, on his own behalf, said he only once struck a member of the crew on the voyage: a cabin boy who was impudent and got his ears boxed.

The crew made their written statements without coercion, and he described how he went on deck just at daybreak the August morning that Hansen went overboard.

He found the ship off course, a gale force wind, and he was told that there was a man hanging on the log line. He swore he couldn't see him, only some spray at the end of the line. "We can't do anything for the poor fellow," he told the helmsman. "Put the ship back on her course."

Battered the government counsel in cross examination;

"Why didn't you turn back and look for him?"

"No man could live in water like that," was the answer.

"Why didn't you turn the ship about?"

"Because you couldn't."

"Isn't it customery," said counsel, "to throw over a life ring or a plank when a man goes overboard, then turn the ship to search for him?"

Pedersen had to admit nothing was thrown over, nor had he ordered anything thrown.

"Why didn't you pull in the log line?" probed the examiner.

"I couldn't be sure he was there. I only saw some spray."

"And you yourself," sneered the lawyer, "you yourself were once rescued from the same predicament!"

There was a hush in the courtroom as counsel sat down.

SO FAR THE TRIAL had been a question of who lied, who told the truth, with occasional side glances at seamanship. Now another aspect showed itself; something to do with the shape of the world's affairs.

This was 1919, the world shaken and exhausted by war, a world in which there were ominous stirrings, for better or for worse, only time would tell. All over the globe it seemed, unemployment and rising prices brought out red flags and red arguments. It was an undercurrent that served to send a chill down the U.S. voter's spine, and when he took sides it was not only against anarchists, syndicalists, communists, bolsheviks and radicals in general, but also in his frenzy, against liberals, near liberals and friends of liberals.

The Sacco-Vanzetti case was only 12 months in the offing.

In this atmosphere, the defence made its psychological move. They called to the stand three Los Angeles policemen, who had served along the Los Angeles waterfront. Patrolman, Harry F. Glazo testified, that he knew Hansen, that he'd seen him in company with IWW members, that he was "chummy" with its secretary, then doing ten years in Leavenworth.

"He was an IWW agitator of the worst type," testified Glazo, and told how Hansen had been arrested for street fighting on two occasions, had violated the Selective Service Act. He forgot to mention, however, that Hansen was still doing the 30-day penalty, three months later, when the Danish consul brought about his release.

During the trial, skipper Pedersen had mentioned that Hansen was a "sea lawyer," and remarked, "I didn't know he was a union man otherwise I would never have signed him on."

Injection of current labor unrest into the defence strategy suited the time and occasion. The jury was out only a brief 16 minutes to return with a verdict of "Not Guilty" for father and son.

THERE ARE STILL with us here on the coast a few enduring oldsters with memories of sail, of towering spars and vessels heeling, white winged, to the trade winds; and some who worked along the waterfront, men who knew the Puako. One in particular with an intimate memory is 72-year-old John Russell Robinson of Chemainus.

I dropped in to see him at 9899 Maple Street the other afternoon, and he told me he'd been 62 years a resident of the pleasant up-Island mill town. Not only did Mr. Robinson know the Puako from its visits to Chemainus for lumber, but he was second engineer in the tug Clayburn when it towed the loaded Puako from Hastings Mill to Esquimalt on the eve of the ill-omened voyage to Cape Town, back in the spring of 1918.

He met "Hell Fire" Pedersen and his sons repeatedly, and although the years have dimmed his memory a little, he still remembers the Puako was the easiest hull to tow.

"We made six knots with her," he told me, "and her with a million and a half feet aboard."

Stevedoring at Chemainus in his latter days he helped load many a windjammer with lumber, and once he remembers nine sailing ships in port, seven of them loading at the same time. His wife Mary, by the way, keen student of every-day affairs, is the Colonist's Chemainus district correspondent.

After the famous trial the Puako came back to Vancouver Island, for good. She arrived in Esquimalt in May, 1921, after a 95-day voyage from Newcastle, N.S.W., under skipper Charles E. Helm. Heavy with marine growth she was hauled out and scraped at Yarrows. Now it was a tough and competitive post-war shipping world, with no place for old barquentines.

Finally in December, 1951, the 49-year-old hull was sold to McMillan and Bloedel and towed up to Royston to meet some old friends that helped form the company's breakwater at Oyster River, which, regardless of what they say, is the real "Graveyard of the Pacific."